II

ARISTOCRACY WITHOUT ILLUSIONS: ALFRED DE VIGNY

IN the presence of the Almighty Voice out of the Whirlwind agonized Job does not "set his cause," but, awed into submission, "abhors himself and repents in dust and ashes." Pascal, despairing of knowing God with his reason, would gamble on possible assurance through faith, even though the price were the surrender of our Thought wherein, he perceives, lies all our dignity. Alfred de Vigny's body and soul were not wracked with all of Job's torments, neither did he survey or sound with Pascal all the marshes of doubt in which our mind gropes. But though unable to move forward with assurance, Vigny does not yield; he stands his ground; man's sorry estate rouses in him pity and never scorn; he honors man's moral integrity above the unreckoned majesty of the Divine, for man can die for a principle, and is thus greater than God. Here is a grim aristocrat's pride, Stoic dignity and fortitude without the compliant Stoic trust in Divine Providence, and never a sign of misanthropy. In poetry, in politics, in religion, he inhabits the ivory tower of his own ideals, unassured but unyielding, an aristocrat despite disillusion.

The epidemic of dolor and general despondency which characterized romanticism manifested itself even in some non-romaticists during the early nineteenth century. Byron, Lamartine, and Musset, Chateaubriand and Senancour

(*Obermann*), Goethe's *Werther,* Heine and Lenau, Ugo Foscolo and Leopardi express the various strains of this universal threnody: Christian-mystical, antitheistic, sentimental, metaphysical, passionate, stoical, misanthropic, humanitarian. As the nineteenth century gets beyond its romantic adolescence, positivism, materialism, realism take possession of it; the microscope replaces meditation in literature. Alfred de Vigny was a pioneer among the romanticists, and from his ivory tower he saw the hosts of naturalism invade the land. We should not, however, regard *Les Destinées* as merely belated romantic wails; Vigny, who prided himself on having marched first, was not a mere follower even of himself. The development in his thought is real and consistent. Byron's influence on his ideas is undeniable; that of Schiller has been pointed out; that of Frederick the Great is not unlikely; to understand Vigny adequately, however, we should see in him more than some one's disciple or than the member of a school.

Those who are bound to reduce a philosophy of despair to personal disappointment, and pessimism to pique, find the case of Alfred de Vigny more puzzling than Pascal's or Leopardi's or Schopenhauer's. Pascal's or Leopardi's lifelong ill health, Leopardi's mother, and also Schopenhauer's, Leopardi's loveless life, and Schopenhauer's long vain struggle for recognition would have driven unphilosophic men to despair and suicide. Vigny lived to see in his own life reasons enough for his gloom, but he was a poet of pessimism at a time when, strong, handsome, and brilliant, he met the smiling eyes of love and fame. To be sure we may call him a pessimist born; or we may thumb our psychiatries in search of Greek terms to describe this odd despond: melancholia dysthymia; or we may simply quote Shakespeare's Salarino to Antonio, in the *Merchant of Venice:* "You are

sad because you are not merry." But Brunetière has rightly perceived in Vigny's pessimism a metaphysical suffering: "the dull anguish that the enigma of destiny stirs at the bottom of the heart." If this woe, which to the 'once-born' man appears so unaccountable, is once recognized we may better appreciate the significance of Vigny's own life-experiences as contributing to intensify his pessimism, to motivate it in detail, and later in life also to alleviate it and to turn his eyes from darkness towards light.

He was an aristocrat from the cradle to the grave: an aristocrat first of all in the traditional sense, proud of his name and race. Somewhat past midway in his life he recorded his inability to imagine finer characters than those in the chronicles of his family. His every thought of his father was a joy; of his mother, a blessing. What if we learn that some of the ancestral dignities which the poet treasured were mythical? Perhaps "Admiral" Barraudin was no admiral, and perhaps no Vigny blood was really shed in the Crusades. We need not go so far back. Alfred's father did fight Frederick the Great, did enter the king's tent to ask permission to seek his brother's body on the field of battle. And Alfred's mother did rear her son in the spirit of aristocratic dignity; she did teach him that nobility was a trust and a duty; she herself "knew duty, loved it, practiced it, and imposed it." He felt himself the last of a great house; the Revolution had wrecked its fortunes, and Vigny wrote in his book the long list of lost family estates. He faced his own life, noble, and poor as a noble is poor, a respectable poverty, rich in honor and self-respect.

The essential nobility of his character it is difficult to assail. Did he marry Lydia Bunbury for the sake of her expected millions, and couldn't Sir Somebody Bunbury remember his son-in-law's identity beyond the fact that he was a

French poet, so that kind Frenchmen had to go down the list of poets until he exclaimed: "Vigny? Yes, I believe that's my man!" But Vigny writes that he never asked his father-in-law for a penny, and in any case, when the Bunbury millions failed to materialize, when he found himself mated to a disinherited invalid to whom his inner life was a closed book and who could not even read his poems, he gave her, if not love, at least all the devoted care which pity and his sense of honor dictated. We cannot ignore the Dorval affair; even if Vigny tried to raise Marie Dorval to his own level, the fact is that he descended to hers. He did live to write: "I feel in me a secret shame for the first time in my life." But dignity is not lacking in the betrayed lover's withdrawal; *Samson's Wrath* is not an ignoble revenge.

The heart of his youth had gone to Napoleon; in the *compagnies rouges* under Bourbon royalty, the young officer dreamt in vain of combat and promotion, he "stifled, imprisoned, within this wooden horse which would never be opened in any Troy." The Bourbons did not give him any recognition, yet during the revolution of 1830, had the Duke d'Enghien or the Duke de Berry made a stand in Paris, he would have risked his life for a house he disdained. Louise Philippe did notice him, but Vigny, never insolent, was never servile. For eighteen years he "resisted all the seductions of the house of Orleans." Disillusioned with Napoleon, repelled by Bourbon lack of integrity and courage, disdainful of the bourgeois nobility of Louis Philippe's shops, ever distrustful of democracy, especially after 1848, Vigny took refuge in the dignity of his own inner being and remained to the end "incorrigibly aristocratic."

He craved fame: what poet doesn't? But he craved perfection above popularity; he would have uttered himself the words which he puts in the mouth of Milton in *Cinq-Mars:*

"Were my verses to remain unread for a hundred years after my death, I should still ever write them." Six times the French Academy spurned him in favor of other candidates, some of them scarcely remembered today; and when he was finally elected a member, the clash with Molé over his speech of reception poisoned Vigny's great day of honor. He had his great days, of course; the days of the fame of *Cinq-Mars,* the night of *Othello,* the wonderful first night of *Chatterton.* But where was lasting satisfaction to be found? When, in his youth, he had put on the new uniform of the Red Company, he had not experienced the expected thrill to the full: "So that is all!" And he lived to find glory disappointing more than once, for what is one to think of glory, he said, when the sculptor of the Laokoön is unknown?

Pride inhabited his ivory tower, the sad pride of disillusion. But steps of devoted pity led downstairs to the beds of pain where for years he nursed first his beloved mother and then his wife until they both very gradually sank into the unknown. His father's last words to him had been, "Make your mother happy." That charge he fulfilled to the last. "Blessed be then the former misfortunes which deprived my father and grandfather of their great chateaux in the Beauce, since they have made me know this joy of a workman's wage brought to one's mother in secret, without her knowing it." When, after twelve years of torture, the 'vulture of Prometheus' (cancer of the stomach), which his doctors neither recognized nor subdued, finally consumed him in 1863, was his cry of distress unto God a coward's cry? Twenty-nine years earlier he had written: The man of honor at his death "looks at the cross with respect, fulfills all his Christian duties as a formality, and dies in silence."

Job atop the ash-heap suffers torments, but his real agony is that he cannot, as a loyal servant of God, make sense of his torments. His torture is really religious. Vigny's despair of life is also due, not so much to his direct experience of evil or to his observation of specific evils in life, as to the half-felt, half-reasoned conviction that in this world inner worth neither prevails nor avails. We live in a world which is callous or even hostile to virtue and high endeavor, a world which includes pure evil but not unmixed good. In this world nobility is humiliated, the innocent suffer, and even generous love may work the ruin of the soul. This essential callousness and injustice of God, Nature,—call it what you will,—Vigny could not understand and refused to accept with submission. The ever-present sense of it poisoned his joys:

> My heart, with joy infatuate,
> My drunken heart, has launched its fate
> In torrent floods of laughter proud;
> But Sorrow's Self before my face
> I see, my laughter I efface,
> My brow in mourning I enshroud.

Our very virtues serve to wreck us, so alien to worth is life. Vigny's works are cantos of an epic of disillusion. *Cinq-Mars* chronicles the earlier chapters of the bankruptcy of the aristocrat; the last chapters were written before Vigny's own eyes. Excellence and nobility of character make men inevitably failures in an ignoble world. The multitude may tremble in awe before the Great Man, but condemn his life of power to solitude; so Moses prays to God to let him sleep the sleep of oblivion:

> O Lord, I've lived my life in lonely majesty:
> The sleep of Mother Earth now vouchsafe to me!

But more often the genius is crushed; society is too frivolous for Gilbert, too materialistic for Chatterton, too cruel

for André Chenier. The world in which a Robespierre disposes of human destinies does not tolerate "the aristocrats of intelligence": it would level all down to the nothingness in which it abides.

Samson's consuming love for Delilah should exalt both, but it destroys him. The woman he loves betrays him to the Philistines. Is Samson ruined because his love is sensual and self-seeking? But self-forgetting devotion may also prove our undoing. A masterpiece of poetic despair is Vigny's *Eloa*. At the grave of Lazarus, moved by pity for the grief of Mary and Martha, Jesus shed a divine tear. Of this tear of Christ's love is born the angel Eloa. What fatality leads this celestial maiden of pure love to meet the Fallen One? Eloa is moved to pity, to love; she would redeem Lucifer, yet is herself swept into the abyss. This spectacle of human life in which high worth and virtue are frustrated need not make us misanthropic; man deserves pity, not hatred. But if Vigny is never a hater of men, he is not a lover of God; his thought and mood are antitheistic. Behold Jephtha's daughter, virgin innocence sacrificed to a malign Deity. Behold Sarah in *The Deluge:* had she married Japhet, son of Noah, she would have been saved with his household; but she loved Emmanuel, and neither her love nor his innocence avail to deliver them from the rising flood of God's wrath.

Is this view of the Almighty too harshly Hebraic? Then turn to the Gospels, Vigny says; come with me to Gethsemane. Here is, not human, Divine Innocence, on bended knee crying out: "Father!"

> But dark the sky remains, and God does not reply.

In place of Doubt and Evil, Christ would bring to man blessed certainty and confident hope. But the night is callous,

and in the woods the Son of God hears the tramp of the mob and sees the blazing torch of Judas Iscariot. Moreover why does Christ die? To atone once for all for man's sins? The death on Calvary should then be expiation enough. Did not Christ cry out on the Cross: "It is finished!" "Was there not enough divine blood for the salvation of the human race!" There is a Pascalian overtone in this note. Vigny is scarcely a Jansenist, Léon Séché to the contrary, but there is in his thought not a little of Pascal's grim struggle with the enigmas of truth and faith. "His Diary often reads like a continuation of Pascal's *Thoughts.*" Faguet's words about Vigny may well be read in a reverse order: "He does not believe in the ideal, but he adores it."

But, we are told, God's ways are not man's ways, and his plans for man are past finding out:

> Your glance forever fix beyond this mortal span:
> That guiltless men should die, seems fathomless to man;
> Be not thou overwhelmed with this, nor seek reply;
> Unlike our pity is the pity from on High;
> God makes no covenant with man; his hand of fate,
> Creating without love, destroys us without hate.

And we are asked to look beyond this life. Note the irony in the closing lines of *The Deluge:*

> "Your father does not come: shall we be punished, then?"
> "Though death should separate, no doubt we'll meet again."

No doubt, but what reason do we have for hope of anything better? The prisoner in the Iron Mask has seen nothing in this life to justify his trust in any hereafter:

> "I do not want it: chains await me there."

What is this look beyond the grave but a look of despair? "The truth about life is despair. The religion of Christ is a religion of despair, since he despairs of life and only trusts in eternity."

If we turn away from God to contemplate nature, we turn from injustice or possible malignity to stone-blind impassivity:

> I'm deaf to all your moans and sighs, and scarcely sense
> The progress of the human comedy immense
> Which vainly seeks a silent audience in heaven. . . .
> A mother I am called, but I'm in truth a tomb;
> My winter sweeps your dead as in a hecatomb;
> My spring is dull to all your adorations. . . .

Turn from God to nature, and back to God; the conclusion is the same:

> In this chaotic world, I see nothing assured
> But SUFFERING AND DEATH, in which our life is moored.

What is man to do, then? Prayers and supplications are vain; vain all violent imprecation, and vainest of all is hope. Understand clearly the firm foundation of despair, and then consider man's estate: tragic and pitiful it is, but despicable never! Do not resist dark contemplation: "It is bad and cowardly to seek distraction from a noble woe so as to diminish suffering. One should reflect upon it, plunge the sword courageously to the hilt." Face God, face nature grimly without murmur and without appeal. Stoic fortitude is alone noble, not the Stoic trust in a somehow-good universe, but rather the fortitude of utter silence without hope or plea: the silence of utter despair in which all is lost save man's tragic dignity, "this half-silence . . . the true Stoicism of an anguished soul and an averted spirit, . . . the religion of honor and valor." A Stoic portrait is that of the dying wolf teaching the hunter who has killed him

> How one should leave this life and all its ills and grime:
> You know it well indeed, you animals sublime!
> What meaning and what gain from this earth do we wrest?—
> Noble alone is silence: weakness, all the rest.

To groan or weep or pray, is all a coward's moil:
So do with might and main your long and heavy toil,
Where'er the path assigned to you by Fate may lie,
And then, like me, without a whimper, suffer, die.

The stanza "Le Silence" concluding (or appended to) *Le Mont des Oliviers* is a poetic document of the dignity of despair:

If in the Holy Garden of Gethsemane
The Son of Man did pray to God, and prayed in vain;
Deaf, blind, and unresponsive to our misery,
If Heav'n did spurn our misbegotten world of pain,
This scorn divine my mortal honor will defy
With scorn, and silence cold will be my one reply
To God's eternal silence and to God's disdain.

So this is the only respectable way out: not wailing, not hopeful, but grimly resistant. Do not seek comfort; steel your soul in 'saintly solitude': the hyenas never attack the traveler so long as he stands up and keeps marching on. This somber fortitude exalts man; and it also stimulates generous compassion with his fellows: against the malign majesty of God or the blind majesty of nature, man's is the tragic majesty of woe:

Live thou, cold Nature, and in waves of life be borne
Triumphant over us, since this is Fate's decree;
Live ever thou and, goddess-like, presume to scorn
Us humble passengers that should rule over thee:
Far more than all your power or all your splendors vain,
I love the majesty of man's unyielding pain:
A single word of love you will not get from me!

The penultimate verse, in Vigny's words, contains the sense of all his philosophical poems: "the spirit of humanity, the utter devotion to mankind and to the betterment of its lot."

"Were I a painter," Vigny wrote, "I should like to be a

black Raphael: angelic form, somber color." This spirit of aristocratic standards and generous fortitude serves in Vigny's life the purposes of a religion. It is the Religion of Honor. The stories in *Servitude et grandeur militaires* are cantos of an epic on Duty. Here is a Kantian exaltation of Duty: routine devotion to one's army vow even when it involves heart-breaking, hateful obedience (*Laurette ou le Cachet rouge*); grim devotion to a disillusion which has nullified all but man's own self-respect (Captain Renaud); noble self-effacing devotion to duty (Admiral Collingwood). "The sentiment of Duty ends by so dominating the mind as to permeate one's character and become second nature, just as constant use of wholesome nourishment can change the quality of one's blood and become a factor in one's constitution." Thus arises honor: "Honor is conscience, but conscience exalted. . . . It is the poesy of duty." Here is the purest and the bravest of religions, an intense and elevated sense of self-respect, "a manly religion, without symbols or imagery, without dogmas and without ceremonies." "Conscience should be divinized," Vigny wrote in his *Diary,* planning his novel *Daphné,* with Julian the Apostate as its hero. Julian's character fascinated Vigny: "If there is metempsychosis I have been this man. His rôle, life, character would have suited me best of any in history." It is the character of a man who, disillusioned and unable to believe, yet sees clearly man's utter need of belief and devotion; an intensely religious man without a religion, an essentially contemplative soul plunging deliberately and entirely into action, into the battle of ideals and devotions.

Is Julian's life, is Vigny's utter failure? But how are we to reckon failure and success? Here the words of Captain Renaud come to the mind: "I saw clearly that events are nothing, that the inner man is everything." And this inner

integrity and worth, candor and fortitude and generosity preserve and ennoble man in the very pit of disaster. Here Vigny recalls Leopardi: "The contemplation of misfortune itself gives the soul inner joy that comes from attending to the idea of misfortune." This is a treasure of truth which is always ours:"Let us be consoled for all by the thought that we enjoy our thought itself, and that nothing can rob us of this joy." A somber treasure! All the same, adversity has not crushed us so long as this devotion to truth still remains. "The day when man has lost all enthusiasm and love and adoration and devotion, let us bore to the center of the earth, put in five hundred billion barrels of powder, and let it blaze to pieces in the firmament!"

From this resigned devotion and despairing generosity there gradually arises a defiant optimism. "Vigny traverses despair, but does not rest in it." Among the last songs of the poet of the ivory tower are songs of light and trust, grimly jubilant songs of an aristocrat despite disillusion. The poet of despair ends on a note of hope. It is a hope in man, in woman, in work, and in civilization. Already in 1843 Vigny's poem *La Sauvage* showed how far he had travelled beyond Rousseau's idolatry of the primitive. Fleeing with her children from the cruelty of the Hurons, the Indian savage woman seeks refuge for herself and her orphans in the house of an English settler. Here man has made himself master of nature, has wrestled with nature's wild domain, has vanquished and humanized it. In the midst of the trackless woodland waste is a garden and a home, a library, the Bible, Shakespeare. To this refuge the savage woman is admitted. There is irony in the hospitality. Time was when the Almighty rejected the sacrifice of the hard-working tiller of the soil, to accept the blood-smelling smoke of the idle herdsman. But here Cain has his revenge: nomad savagery,

disdainful of work and of womankind, is here abased before law-abiding, home-building thrift. This is the voice of civilization as it penetrates the jungle:

> She says, in building each new city: "See!—
> You call me Law, but I am Liberty!"

This eulogy of civilized man expresses a faith in the progress of ideals, a faith even in the midst of disaster, of shipwreck. So in the poem *The Bottle in the Sea,* as the storm rages and the waves beat the dismayed ship to pulp against the unsuspected and uncharted rocks, as the waters sweep over the decks, the sailors do all in their power to save their boat and their lives. But when all effort proves futile, the captain does the one thing left to him: he records latitude and longitude of the unmarked reef which the wrecking of his ship has served to discover; he issues the warning, seals the precious knowledge in a strong bottle, and trusts it to the waves that sweep him and his crew to death. The bottle floats long and alone on endless seas, but at last it comes within the reach of human eyes and human hands. The captain's hope is not frustrated, nor is his death and the death of his men in vain. One more step has been marked in man's mastery over brute nature. This poem is a song of courage and hope and glory to explorer, sailor, craftsman, scientist, warriors all in man's great combat with nature:

> The true God, God Almighty, is the God of thought.
> The seed that Fate on our deep furrowed brows has cast,
> Neglect it not, to harvest be it ever brought;
> Reap, gather in the grain, the soul's own treasure vast;
> All redolent it is of saintly solitudes:
> Then toss it to the sea, the sea of multitudes!
> God's finger will conduct it safe to port at last.

A chant of hope, of trust in man is also the poem *La Flute:* if efforts prove unavailing, and your cause seems to falter and fail, and the harmony you are endeavoring to create turns to discord, do not despair. The flute, not the flutist, is at fault:

> Blame not the soul of man, the beggar-body blame;
> What wretched organs here our mind's endeavors shame!
> . . . . . .
> Like crude translators of some bright celestial bard
> They stammer. . . .

The poem *L'Esprit pur,* Vigny's last, written six months before his death, is impressive in its noble assurance. One should have Vigny's *Diary* and his *Correspondence* well in hand to appreciate fully the noble pathos of this swan-song. Vigny contemplates the past glories of his house, and then considers his own lot:

> Dead, all of them, their names forgot without renown;
> But read the writing in the Golden Book Divine:
> "Two families of France the road of life passed down;
> Their last descendant now ascends the holy shrine
> And writes his name, but not upon the rolls obscure
> Of proud knaves, useless rich, but on the tablet pure
> That destiny unto Pure Spirit doth assign."

The influence of Comte on Vigny's thought is evident here, although the poet had too keen a sense of individuality to find unqualified peace in the Cult of Humanity, and his problems were too metaphysical in character to be resolved altogether by anthropocentric or geocentric positivism; his altruism, moreover, had the note of grim pity that scarcely accords with the bright cheer of Comte's humanitarianism. Vigny is brimful of fertile ideas, and his mind is never encased in a formula. Faguet observes the great concentration of his style: "In his *Diary,* which is the key to all his

thought, he sometimes sketches in half-a-dozen lines a whole philosophical system that would have done credit to a great thinker." So we should not be too assured in recording Vigny's final diagnosis and remedy: utopianism in the face of adversity, grim optimism. For what avails the prospect, be it never so certain, that the shipwrecked captain's bottle will some day reach port, that the youth of France will some day read Vigny and with him honorably face this world's despair? In the total economy of the vast chaos which we call the universe, what avail the progress or the stagnation, the prosperity or the ruin of France, human profit or loss, terrestrial book-keeping? Climb Montmartre, look at the immense city of Paris: "a little higher, what would this city be, what would be this earth? What are we in God's sight?" —a thought that had disturbed Montaigne also, and harrowed Pascal. We may perhaps regard Vigny's resolve to trust his destiny to man's spirit and to enlightened posterity as a Pascalian hazard and plunge of faith. Or we may, and I think with more justice, perceive in these last poems the wisdom of Leopardi's capital work, *La Ginestra*. Has God put us in this sorry world, face to face with brute unresponsive nature? Our only hope and reliance then is to be sought in our inner sense of generous honor. Fortitude, self-respect, pity bind mankind in resistance to Stepmother Nature. Slowly but surely scientist and poet and artisan and seer are writing in the Book of Pure Spirit the mastery of man's soul over its callous medium. Slowly but surely, as duty and pity become our master passions, human life is redeemed from the brute, and human society becomes a true republic. This deepening of cosmic confidence disdains the supernatural and the ritualistic-liturgical aspects of Christianity, but it is permeated with the Christian spirit of benevolence, and with respect for weak but aspiring human nature. Vigny's

benevolence was not merely a poetic gesture, nor was it limited to the tender care for his mother and for his wife. The poet of *Stello,* of *Chatterton* championed actively the cause of individual needy authors, and made their lives more bearable. At New Years' Eve he would review the twelve-month past and thank Heaven that he had done no evil to any human soul, nor written against his conscience nor against his fellow men.

There are in Vigny gleams of a Zoroastrian hope in the extinction, and more, even in the reclaiming of evil. In his Diary is the outline of a projected poem, *Satan Saved.* In another passage he contemplates that at the Last Judgment, "God will come to JUSTIFY himself before all souls and all life. He will appear and will speak; he will tell clearly the why and wherefore of creation, of the suffering, and the death of innocence." Is this a sentence from Vigny's Theodicy? The next sentence reads: "On that day it will be mankind, brought to life, that will be the judge, and the Eternal, the Creator will be judged by the generations of men." It is like a double-edged commentary on a verse from the Book of Job.

Do we really know enough to hope? The map is never finished, and the beast of prey is never quite banished from our souls. And who knows, perhaps God regards man's enterprise as a boy watches the building of a bird's nest: almost finished, and a brush of the hand destroys it all. Are our terrestrial prospects any more secure? Vigny has no answer; he only knows that any other course but that of duty, honor, pity would be cowardly and would tarnish the one grain of gold in this world of dross: man's moral endeavor. "I am an epic moralist," he writes. In all his dismay and despair he never doubts the inherent and unshakable worth of noble effort: "What matters it," we read in

Daphné, "if the good is only done, whether one is or is not trampled under foot?" The ship is being submerged; what am I to do? Epictetus the Stoic tells me: "Drown like a man." Vigny:

"Toss your work to the sea, the sea of multitudes."